DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 162 JC 830 812

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TITLE Handling Difficult Questions and Situations.
PUB DATE 9 Sep 83
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
JOURNAL CIT Innovation Abstracts; v5 n24 Sep 9 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Problems; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Guidelines; Postsecondary Education; Secondary Education; *Student Behavior; Student Teacher Relationship; *Teacher Response
IDENTIFIERS *Disruptive Behavior: PF Project; *Student Questions

ABSTRACT

Recommendations are presented for dealing with difficult students and the questions they ask during classroom discussions. Brief ideas are provided for handling argumentative individuals, long-winded questioners, and questions for which the instructor does not have a good answer. A discussion of curved or loaded questions (pseudoquestions) identifies eight types of these questions, examines their effects on communication, and suggests some strategies for handling them. Finally, several techniques of public speakers are described which can be used for dealing with hostile or resistant students. (DC)

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HANDLING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AND SITUATIONS

by Karen Watkins

Innovation Abstracts; v5 n24 September 9, 1983

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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

VOL. V
NO. 24

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development
With support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation

HANDLING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AND SITUATIONS

Discussion is a valuable learning tool. When you encourage student participation but suddenly find you have more--or different--participation than you bargained for, there are some strategies that can help you get the discussion back on a constructive track. First, however, let's look at some common difficult questions and situations.

THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIVIDUAL. When a student argues for the sake of argument, you will almost always lose if you take part. By engaging in the argument, you lose credibility with the rest of the class. Such people usually want attention, so simply giving them some recognition while firmly moving on often takes care of the problem.

THE CURVED OR LOADED QUESTION. This question is designed specifically to embarrass you. The questioner is, again, probably seeking recognition and also trying to place you on the defensive. Examples of such questions include, "How do you *really* know that . . . ?" or "You're not really saying that . . . ?"

One way to respond to such questions is to play boomerang. "What I am saying is . . ., but now I'd like you to share your perspective." Turning the question back to the questioner forces her to take responsibility for her opinion.

Pfeiffer and Jones discuss the problem of questions as a manipulative form of indirect communication or noncommunication. They identify eight types of pseudoquestions that interfere with clear communication:

The cooptive question begins with something like, "Don't you think . . .?" The questioner attempts to restrict you to a positive response.

The punitive question is generally meant to expose the respondent without appearing to do so. Here the student may ask a series of questions, all intended to trap you into a particular position or a contradiction.

The hypothetical question can be used to criticize indirectly. For example, "If you had written the chapter assigned for today, would you have included . . . ?"

The imperative question, while phrased as a question, implies a command: "Haven't you done anything about . . . ?"

The veiled question is one of the most common pseudoquestions. The questioner asks another person his preference rather than making a simple assertion of his own preference first. The question "Would you rather have these reports in on Monday?" may be the student's indirect way of buying time.

The setup question is an attempt to lead you into a trap. It may begin with "Would you agree that . . .?" You know you've been set up when the questioner follows with "Then you'd probably also agree that . . . ."

The rhetorical question usually appears in one of two forms. The questioner does not give you a chance to respond, or he concludes with a phrase that assumes your agreement ("Right?").

The "got you" question is an accusation: "Didn't you say earlier that . . . ?" You will recognize this question type by the questioner's obvious glee when she catches you.

Pfeiffer and Jones see five major effects that derive from these indirect exchanges:

- Rather than communicating directly, both individuals are left having to guess the other's intention.
- When forced to guess about the meaning intended, either individual can be wrong. This increases the inaccuracy of communication.
- A person who communicates indirectly is likely to infer motives in the other person, and indirect communication increases the probability that the inferred motives will be negative.
- Indirect communication encourages people to play games with each other.
- Indirect communication is likely to leave the instructor feeling defensive.

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Some strategies you can use to increase direct communication:

Confrontation. Confront the questioner with your reaction to his or her behavior. "I am uncomfortable with the indirectness of your questions. What I really hear you saying is . . . ."

Active listening. Paraphrase the message you heard and check out the accuracy of your assumptions before responding.

Owning or modeling. Use direct statements rather than questions.

Locating. Ask the questioner to explain the context behind the question.

Sharing. View communication as a sharing process; be willing to take risks and work toward achieving a common meaning.

THE LONG-WINDED QUESTIONER. Some students go on indefinitely when asking questions. Two strategies are effective. If you can anticipate the question, intervene to both ask and answer the question as quickly as possible, or you can jump in and deal with part of the question.

QUESTIONS FOR WHICH YOU DON'T HAVE A GOOD ANSWER. The most important thing is to say, "I don't know." Attempt to satisfy the questioner by asking if anyone else has an idea or by agreeing to look up the information if it's appropriate to the subject.

HOSTILE OR RESISTANT STUDENTS. Because public speakers often attempt to persuade, research in this field offers helpful advice for instructors who encounter resistance.

Here are some strategies public speakers use:

If a student makes an angry negative remark ("Why did you flunk me on that test?"), *neutralize it by coming back with a positive response.* ("I understand how you feel. Let me clarify how my grading criteria.")

If you can agree with the person's initial statement without contradicting your lecture or compromising your position, do so. You may not be able to turn the student around, but you can defuse his anger.

Make either no comments or only neutral comments, such as "I understand what you're saying," as the student expresses her feelings.

Give the hostile individual an action outlet, and demonstrate an assertive, active posture yourself. The student who is upset about a grade will be most satisfied if you give him an alternative: taking an alternative version of the test, having one grade dropped from all tests, or just having an opportunity to explain his perspective to you, preferably in writing.

Take personal concerns into account. Writing about people and change, Gene Hall says that people who seem to resist change actually have heightened personal concerns. In other words, they are not sure how the change will affect them personally. By listening carefully to the personal concerns implied by hostile individuals, you can often respond more accurately to the feeling behind the message.

Call on the students' deeper values. If students see that their anger conflicts with their most deeply held values, you may be able to create sufficient cognitive dissonance to calm them.

Confront the behavior you see. Don't humiliate or attack the student, but clarify and describe exactly what you see. "I get the impression that you feel very strongly about [this question]. I recognize that there's more than one way of viewing [this question], and I don't want to fight with you. I think the classroom should be a place where many perspectives are presented so we can learn from each other."

Reframe. Clarify the assumptions behind the person's argument and then invite her to see alternative possibilities. "Your argument is premised on the idea that people cannot be trusted. How would you restructure your position to reflect the assumption that people can be trusted?"

Avoiding argumentative students altogether is impossible, but we can prepare ourselves beforehand to make such confrontations as painless as possible for ourselves and for our students.

Dr. Karen Watkins, Managing Editor
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For further information, see Watkins, Karen. *Improving Presentation and Discussion Skills.* New York: HBJ Media Systems, 1982.

Managing Editor, Karen Watkins
September 9, 1983, VOL. V, NO. 24

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Subscriptions are available to nonconsortium members for $35 per year. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and [illegible] Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms and bimonthly during summer months.

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